

HEALTH AND HUMAN SCIENCES

Psychopathy in Daily Life

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Psychopathy is a personality disorder characterized by a set of diverse traits—interpersonal antagonism, disinhibition, narcissism, and emotional instability. Previous theorizing suggests that these different traits may underlie distinct behaviors. The present study used ecological momentary assessment (EMA) to examine the relations between the different self-reported psychopathy traits and the impact of various behaviors in daily life. The EMA method, which involves assessing participants in real time as they go about their daily lives, provides several advantages over standard self-reporting methods, including minimizing effects unique to recall, recording more accurate dates and times of events, and obtaining better estimates of mean levels of subjective variables (e.g., mood) because they are not influenced by rare but salient moments of extreme experiences. In this study, participants were 79 undergraduate students (25 men, 54 women) given course credit for their participation, which involved a baseline assessment and carrying PalmPilot personal digital assistants (PDAs) for one week. PDAs signaled and presented participants with questionnaires eight times each day, asking about current mood, behavior, and interpersonal context. Results indicated that disinhibition plays in an important role in negative affect—anger, guilt, and depression. Moreover, disinhibition also predicted engaging in behaviors that might cause harm to others. Interpersonal antagonism and narcissism also played important roles in depressed affect. The results are consistent with initial hypotheses and the

general idea that psychopathy is a multifaceted construct. Results also illustrate the utility of using EMA to study personality and personality disorders.

Research advisor and mentor Donald Lynam writes, “Erica Gurnell did an outstanding job on this project. Despite several unanticipated difficulties, Erica was able to fashion an interesting study that should be of interest to the larger field.”



Example of the PalmPilot used in the study.

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